The Shepherd

March 29, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Isaiah 40:6-11
John 10:1-21

"I am the good shepherd."
-John 10:11a (RSV)

At 9:00 a.m. every morning, in Spandau Prison, West Berlin, the door swings open and a solitary old man emerges and takes a walk. Rudolf Hess is 92 now and his walks are becoming shorter and less frequent. Hess was one of Adolf Hitler's deputies. He was sentenced to life imprisonment at the Nuremburg War Crime Trials and has been in Spandau ever since. He's been there for forty years, now alone, waiting to die.

The press gives him a few lines as he passes each birthday: his son made a concerted and well publicized attempt to get him out of prison on his 90th. I was reminded of Hess last week when my eye caught an obscure notice in the newspaper that he had been returned to his cell in Spandau Prison after having been hospitalized with pneumonia. I find the thought of Rudolf Hess disconcerting. It's not so much curiosity and I hope not morbid interest as it is profound discomfort. It is such an absolute waste: such a waste of money providing that prison for one prisoner. But mostly it's the incongruity, the anomaly of the whole scenario that gets to me. Hess is clearly alive. You can see him walking back and forth in the courtyard, a little more stooped on each birthday. But just as clearly, whatever it is Hess is doing it is not living, at least at nothing even close to the potential and freedom and capacity for experiencing, celebrating, loving and giving that each human life has inherently; "existing" perhaps, but barely, minimally, putting in time in an almost Shakespearean sense...

> "Tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time:
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle."
> [Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5. Line 19]

That's what is so deeply disconcerting about Hess. The antithesis. He's alive but not living. And he becomes, himself, a metaphor for the human condition: a symbol of a dynamic we see sometimes and feel hedging us in. We know intuitively the wrongness of life that is not really life.

We know in our bones the moral wrongness of wasting the precious gift of life. We know, intuitively, the profound tragedy of human life shackled, fettered, straightjacketed by anything which diminishes, confines and makes it less than the fullness it could be...anything: fear, for instance, or the absence of hope: or actual physical confinement.

It is a big issue, perhaps the biggest one of all. How to live fully? How to realize somehow the value and potential of this chunk of time God has given to me to live? St. Paul wrestled with it a lot. He called the forces that diminish human life "principalities and powers." For Paul, scholar that he was, the chief principality or power that diminishes human life is death. In addition, Paul observed that death is not simply an event in the future that will happen to each of us one day. It is a reality that intrudes in life in the middle of living: in the form of fear, perhaps, dread, or that quietly nagging sense of our own mortality which we cannot shake. Death is a power that dulls and constricts the force of life in us. Sometimes it is seductive power to which we voluntarily sacrifice life because it appears easy and comfortable and there are fewer risks, and it always seems like better odds to die a little - or live a little less - by lowering our sites and breathing less deeply and living less intensely and desiring less urgently and loving less passionately.

Life and death. Death in the midst of life. Or life, full human life, before death, in spite of death. It is the issue for us and it is the issue throughout the Fourth Gospel. It is presented over and over in the Gospel according to John, with such exquisite literacy and such a fine artistic touch that you can miss it actually. There are in the New Testament three sequential accounts of the life of Jesus: Matthew, Mark and Luke. And then there is this other, this very different book which upon examination is actually a series of essays on the subject of life, the quality of life which Jesus Christ offers, the new life. The Fourth Gospel is a wonderful picture book, each an illustration of the author's passionate concern - which is full human life. Think of those wonderful pictures... Nicodemus, the distinguished Pharisee knocking on the door late at night; a crippled man picking up his mat and walking; an outcast woman; a blind man seeing and, finally, a dead man resurrected. Throughout, the author keeps inviting us to consider our own lives and the ways in which they may be less than they could be; to see ourselves, perhaps, in the pictures of those wonderfully human characters who for one reason or another, are not very much alive. The author...the evangelist - invites us to see that in Jesus Christ, God has done something to enhance, deepen and celebrate the life in us in a magnificent and mysterious way.

The incidents the author writes about - the pictures, if you will - are not, in and of themselves, particularly religious. That is why they are so interesting. They are not pictures of people praying, singing hymns or sending money... They are beautiful pictures of life: people at a wedding, enjoying a good vintage wine: a woman, balancing a water jar on her head, walking to the only well where she is welcome, several miles out of town; fishermen at dawn and the charcoal fire on the beach; the hillside, and the sheep, and the shepherd who calls each one by name.

Now the curious thing is that for a book about religion which is what

one might be inclined to call the Fourth Gospel, what religion there is in the pictures is not portrayed very positively. In fact, when you look at them all, it becomes clear that religion is part of the problem: religion is one of the things with which human life has to contend. Religious people are a drag in John. Jesus goes around enhancing life, encouraging, celebrating, healing and restoring life and religion follows him around objecting. Jesus makes new wine, helps a man walk, another man see, still another live, and the religious people stand around the edges saying things like, "Yes, but it's the Sabbath. You shouldn't have done that - it's the wrong day. He's unclean. She's from the wrong side of the tracks." Religion emerges as one of the reasons people are not fully alive. This author opens the story of Jesus with an incident in which Jesus drives money changers from the Temple: the ongoing narrative is in many ways a running argument between Jesus and the religious people, increasing in vehemence, and the climax is the crucifixion - in John, more clearly than anywhere else in the New Testament - the result of a religious plot.

Religion in the Fourth Gospel, which doesn't pretend to be objective about it, has become grim, tight-lipped, frowning, scowling; a maze of rules and restrictions that required a codified law and a profession of people just to copy it all down and another to interpret it and still another to oversee the whole system. Religion, here and elsewhere in the Bible, leaves people feeling like a flock of helpless, lost sheep, without a shepherd; feeling guilty, inadequate - or very bored. And that's tragic irony because the God to whom all this religious paraphenalia attempts to point, is first of all the Life-Giver, the one who creates life as an act of self-expression, the artist who creates it, stands back and looks at it and says "That's good: in fact, very good!" The tragedy is that the God to whom religion tries to point creates life and spreads it around in an incredible kaleidoscope of shapes and forms and colors and then creates women and men and tells them to be the Stewards, the managers of this gift: to love it as much as God does, to nuture it and celebrate and protect it and defend it, and most of all to enjoy it along the way - which is always the best way to thank the giver of any gift. The irony which the Fourth Gospel presents is that instead of helping people do that, religion gets in the way and looks pretty deadly.

When Jesus gives life to a blind man in the form of his sight, the religious people can't handle it. They argue, insult, try to discredit, and finally eject the poor man from the community. And it is for their benefit that Jesus told a story - another picture, if you will...three small pieces actually, a kind of triptych.

The first is of a sheepfold and a shepherd who enters by the proper gate and knows the sheep, and leads them out, calling each by name.

The contrasting image is the thief who scales the wall, doesn't know the sheep and from whom the sheep flee. The religious authorities don't understand so Jesus tries again. In this picture the shepherd is sleeping in the gateway, protecting the sheep. Anybody else in that gateway is a fraud. And then the third picture, a shepherd, a good shepherd. This shepherd actually does what no shepherd would do. In addition to knowing each one, he lays his life down for the sheep. Shepherds don't do that. It's a strong metaphor - but anyone who knows about sheep, or about

business, knows that it is not a description of the way things are. The point of the entire sequence, the point Jesus wishes to make with the religious authorities is not that religion is bad. Jesus was a practioner of his own religion. The point is that valid religion is concerned not primarily with itself, but with life: that the purpose of religion in God's economy is to enhance human life: that valid religion is life-affirming, life-giving, life celebrating. The point comes strongly in the middle of the Good Shepherd image: "The thief comes to kill and steal and destroy: I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

The power of that metaphor - "I am the Good Shepherd" was enhanced for me by the opportunity actually to know some shepherds. There are still a lot of sheep raised in the border country of Scotland where I spent some time. On the wall of my office hangs a shepherd's crook, a shepherd gave me on the last Sunday night I preached at his tiny rural parish kirk. The shepherds I met were interesting characters: rough, strong: one was a young woman: a married couple worked together as shepherds: but mostly they were lone individuals, not very cultivated, and because they were not in town much, almost mystical and mythological. They walk miles and miles every day, without exception. They chase the sheep up the mountain side each evening and then down again in the morning. They help with "lambing" in the spring. They gather the sheep for "clipping" and marking - a ritual in which we participated to their great amusement. And sometimes they stand a sheep on its feet. On a walk once we came on a sheep - upside down, his feet sticking in the air. We didn't know what to do, so did nothing, but my shepherd friend told me that when the wool is full grown and water logged, a fallen sheep simply rolls over, can't get up and will die shortly. Domestic sheep might make it without a shepherd but it wouldn't be easy and it wouldn't be much of a life.

The Old Testament is full of that rich symbolism. God appoints Joshua to lead the people so they won't have to wander like sheep without a shepherd. "All we like sheep have gone astray," the prophet wrote, and, of course, "The Lord is my Shepherd." A captivating image so true that it is ageless and full of meaning for all people, whether or not they have ever seen a shepherd.

When Jesus invoked the picture of a shepherd he was calling up one of the most powerful and traditional figures in his people's history and culture. The object of a shepherd's very being is life... The theological idea is God's love which is always on the side of life. The context was the religion which seemed not only ineffectual, but unwittingly had ended up opposing, denying and restricting life. It was a strong indictment, actually, of those religious leaders, who in Jesus' eyes, looked more like sheep-stealers than shepherds. And it is a timeless warning that the seeds of that dynamic are always present in religion that takes itself more seriously than the God it intends to worship and adore.

That, it seems to me, is the real tragedy of the disclosures about the television evangelists last week. When religion finally made it on prime time television, Nightline and National News, and the front page of the newspaper, it wasn't because we had done or said something wonderfully life affirming, but because we had been caught in our own self-righteousness yet again. Some our loudest most beligerent and most

successful proponents were taking themselves too seriously, and the pharphenalia of religion had once again gotten in the way. This time the paraphenalia is not phylacteries, prayer shawls and dietary laws of the Pharisees, but television cameras, and media empires, and enormous amounts of money and corporate jets and, of all things, a religious amusement park. I'm glad for a God with a sense of humor - and a God who can weep at the occasional silliness and consistent misdirection of well-meaning people. I'm glad for a God whose love extends to all.

Sheep - without a shepherd. That's what we all are isn't it? The Jim Bakkers and the Jerry Falwells, and the millions of people who support their enterprises $23 at a time, the Cardinal, and the Moderator of the General Assembly and you and I...sheep looking for some shepherd who knows our name and who will be there for us and with us when it gets dark in the valley.

The picture in the Fourth Gospel is a warning about what happens when religion gets too enamoured with itself, but it's also a promise that the God Jesus knew as father, this wonderfully parental God, can be counted on to be for human life at its most human and at its most lively. If you can recall the Civil Rights movement, or if you were in any way touched by it, you will remember the enormous power of the Gospel's basic affirmation of human life. This country changed its laws and its behavior and gradually its thinking because people in the Judeo-Christian tradition couldn't let go of the sanctity of human life and the theology of that Shepherd God who is willing to die so that the sheep can live.

Count on Jesus to be for life. We can't seem to comprehend, or perhaps don't want to comprehend, that a powerful part of the revolutionary fervor in Central America and South America - comes from Catholic and Evangelical Protestant Christianity - which has decided to be for full life instead of death. People are not content to live with the deadliness of dictatorship: the grinding poverty which has accompanied dictatorships of the right, and the dehumanizing oppression and absence of liberty in dictatorships of the left...; because they have read in the Bible - and heard from the pulpit words of Jesus - "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly." God is the power of life: the power of life is of God. What do you suppose might happen if we spent, dollar for dollar, to nurture human life in Nicaragua, as a counterpoint to the war we are sponsoring and financing? What do you suppose might happen - intellectually, spiritually, and politically, if people who have been only half alive for centuries were enabled to live; if life were healed and affirmed; if love for life would translate into schools and health care and fertilizers; instead of helicopters and mortars and hand grenades?

Count on the Shepherd God to be on the side of life, which always means, opposed to the power of death.

The promise in this passage is that the Good Shepherd will show up in your life when you stray - when, for instance you flirt with something less than life: The Good Shepherd may lead you home - in a bad conscience, perhaps that won't let you sleep at night; or in nagging impatience with injustice or dishonesty which keeps shouting for your attention. Count on the Good Shepherd to be the advocate for fullness of life as you ponder

your plans for the future and make difficult decisions, or as you evaluate and struggle with your relationships. The Good Shepherd will be there...to remind you that God's purpose in creation is abundant human life...and furthermore, that what God had in mind in creating you is abundant, full human life.

Think of it! This ancient picture, found in an ancient book with its roots in an even more ancient past, presents an idea so magnificent, so astonishing, so radical - that it is always fresh.

It is that the Creator intends human life, has fashioned human life and loves human life.

It is, furthermore, that the Creator becomes very detailed and very specific - has intended your human life, fashioned your human life and loves your human life. The most majestic idea in the whole vast resource of human ideas is this... The Creator knows your name. That means that when you are feeling smallest, most insignificant and of no importance - there is one who knows your name... It means that when you are most alone, most cut off, there is one who has not forgotten you. It means that when times and circumstance separate you from those dearest to you; parents, children, lovers and friends, there is one who cares for them. It is the most majestic idea of all...

It is, further still, that the Creator loves you so much he became one of us, in the flesh and blood of Jesus our brother, and that to make common cause, to show us how much we are valued and loved, and to invite us to live in that love, has done the unthinkable; has laid down life and died, with us and for us.

Our deepest need is to know that this chunk of time which has been given to us, is not for nothing, is not a joke, not an accident, but a gift, an intentional gesture, that it has meaning and purpose and that nothing, not even death, will negate it.

And so - this ancient picture of a Good Shepherd who may be counted on even in the Valley of the Shadow, who will come after us when we are lost, and put us back on our feet when we are upside down, who will sleep in the gateway and protect us at night, and call us each by name, will be there for us in life and in death.

"I am the good shepherd" he said. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I know my own and my own know me."

Thanks be to you, O God, for the gift of life.

Thanks be to you for impatience with less than life;
and anger in us at all that denies life.

Thanks be to you for your presence in life with us.

Thanks and praise to you, Creator God, through Jesus Christ. Amen.